

## *At last, some good news*

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### **Body**

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Optimism is deeply unfashionable these days, especially among the so-called chattering classes. Self-styled progressives, in particular, are reluctant to admit there's been progress on almost anything. Gloom too often masquerades as profundity.

Here on the editorial page we admit we fall victim to this syndrome much of the time. We're quick to find the cloud behind every silver lining, the fly in every pot of ointment.

But with the new year only a few days old it seems fitting for once to look on the bright side. There is some good news at the dawn of this new decade, amid the usual shower of fraud and folly.

We'll get back to chronicling all that soon enough. But here for now are a few reasons to see the glass as at least half full:

Climate change has leapt to the top of the political agenda. Governments are still delaying and denying, and there's plenty of alarming news (such as Australia's record heat and raging wildfires). But there's a groundswell of public support, especially among young people, for real action. There's increasing evidence from mainstream sources that it is possible to cut emissions deeply without tanking the economy, as Europe's new Green Deal plan promises. The missing ingredient has always been political will, and that is changing fast as a new generation, symbolized by the likes of Greta Thunberg, finds its voice.

Investors are souring on fossil fuels. It's one thing for teens to cut school and take to the streets in the name of climate action, but big money speaks a lot louder. Goldman Sachs now says it won't finance any more oil drilling or exploration in the Arctic and won't invest in coal. Hundreds of institutional investors are also turning away from oil and gas, under pressure from activists. More and more of them see the writing on the wall.

Renewable energy, meanwhile, is becoming much cheaper. Solar, onshore wind and geothermal energy are now more often able to compete with the cost of building new fossil fuel plants, even without subsidies, with China taking the lead in driving down prices. Renewables will soon be not just the moral choice in many cases, but the cheapest choice.

The end may be nigh for disposables. More and more people are rejecting the use-once-and-throw-away culture. Cafes in trend-setting San Francisco ended the old year by banning disposable coffee cups; customers are now required to bring their own mug or pay a deposit for a reusable cup. The big chains are getting the message. They're developing a cup that's recyclable and disposable. Costa Rica has gone much further: it's banning plastic straws, bags, cutlery and bags. It may not be long before disposables are as socially unacceptable as spitting on the sidewalk.

Fewer people are dying in wars. Researchers at Sweden's Uppsala University found the number killed in war was the lowest in seven years (down 43 per cent since 2014) as the conflicts in Syria and Iraq subsided. Tragically, the

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fighting in Yemen worsened at the same time, resulting in a humanitarian disaster, and Afghanistan saw an upsurge in violence. But overall the world is a more peaceful place than it's been in years.

Women are making progress in some unlikely places. Saudi Arabia is still a deeply repressive country, but women now enjoy rights they could only dream about a few years ago. So-called guardianship laws were greatly weakened last year, allowing women to travel, receive equal treatment in the workplace and obtain official documents without the permission of a male relative. They can also now drive, attend entertainment events, and don't have to wear traditional black abayas. For a country that has long treated half its people as second-class citizens, it's a sea-change.

There have been big victories against threats to world health. The number of cholera cases is down by 60 per cent, according to the World Health Organization, which launched a global strategy against the deadly disease in 2017. At the same time, the WHO says the number of men using tobacco is on the decline after years of increase. The number of women and girls who use tobacco has been falling for years, and the organization says the downturn in men who smoke "marks a turning point in the fight against tobacco." Millions of lives will be saved.

Canada didn't succumb to populist trends. Two-thirds of voters backed progressive parties in October's federal election. Conservatives aren't just looking for a new leader; they're groping for a way back to the political centre. At a time when so many other countries have succumbed to the lure of immigrant-bashing and phoney nationalism, this was a very positive development. The conditions are there in the minority Parliament for productive action on climate change and social policy.

There are no guarantees on any of these points. And there's lots of evidence out there for those who prefer to dwell on the dark side of the news. So never fear; we have 360 or so days left in 2020 to get back to worry and woe.

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